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Ann Hage

BOOKS

Murder Will Out

3/6/78

New Yorker

AT approximately four-thirty on the afternoon of April 26, 1937, a small flight of Italian planes appeared over the Basque town of Guernica. They were followed by successive waves of German planes belonging to the Condor Legion, Luftwaffe "volunteers" sent by Nazi Germany to assist Franco's armies. These waves, each made up of some fifteen to twenty bombers and fighters, included Heinkel 111s and Junkers 52s for bombing and Heinkel 51s for pursuit and machine-gunning. Bombing and strafing went on for more than three hours. Driven by strong winds, the flames turned Guernica into an inferno. Fugitives able to reach open country were gunned down from the air. Estimates of casualties vary: the most plausible put the dead at sixteen hundred, and the wounded at between

eight and nine hundred. By noon on April 29th, the first Nationalist troops entered the smoldering ruins.

The destruction at Guernica, an open town nine miles behind the front, was witnessed not only by the victims but by two superbly accurate and responsible observers. George Lowther Steer's report appeared in the *Times* of London, his home paper, and in the *New York Times* on April 28th. His account remains a classic of reporting:

The whole town of 7000 inhabitants, plus 3000 refugees, was slowly and systematically pounded to pieces. Over a radius of five miles round a detail of the raiders' technique was to bomb separate *caserios*, or farmhouses. In the night these burned like little candles in the hills....

The tactics of the bombers, which may be of interest to students of the new

military science, were as follows: First, small parties of airplanes threw heavy bombs and hand grenades all over the town, choosing area after area in orderly fashion. Next came fighting machines which swooped low to machine-gun those who ran in panic from dugouts, some of which had already been penetrated by 1000 lb. bombs, which make a hole 25 ft. deep. Many of these people were killed as they ran. A large herd of sheep being brought in to the market was also wiped out. The object of this move was apparently to drive the population underground again, for next as many as 12 bombers appeared at a time dropping heavy and incendiary bombs upon the ruins. The rhythm of this bombing of an open town was, therefore, a logical one: first, hand grenades and heavy bombs to stampede the population, then machine-gunning to drive them below, next heavy and incendiary bombs to wreck the houses and burn them on top of their victims.

The second preëminent witness was Father Alberto de Onaindia, a canon in the cathedral of Valladolid, on his way through the Basque country to take his mother and other members of his family from the danger zone. He reached Guernica just as the onslaught began:

Through the streets wandered the animals brought to market, donkeys, pigs, chickens. In the midst of that conflagration we saw people who fled screaming, praying, or gesticulating against the attackers.... All the gutters and ditches were filled with people who wanted to hide or find protection against the cowardly attack of the enemy air force....

Guernica was burning. We did not perceive many flames during the first two hours because it was day and the smoke was hiding the fires. But when we wished to penetrate into the town, we could not take many steps without feeling ourselves choked by the smoke and the flames which were beginning to consume all the dwellings.

One would think that the facts of so hideous, public, and closely witnessed an event would have been established. But this was not to be. Controversy over just what took place in the skies above, and in the streets of, Guernica on that "radiant" April afternoon and evening (the adjective is Father Onaindia's) persisted from the moment of the attack almost until today. It ranged from blanket denials that Guernica was ever bombed to intricate qualifications and apologetics aimed at putting the event in an entirely different light. How can this be? How can doubt or lies demean even massacre, and seek to bury the dead twice over in oblivion?



"She's all work and no play."

cadante, who will be the first to approve these ideas of mine, to Tadolini herself, and do what in your wisdom you think best." (In the event, Tadolini did sing the role, both that season and the next.) Second, "marvellous" Tadolini voices, clear, limpid, and strong, are not common today, and few sopranos need strive when tackling the Lady's difficult music to achieve harshness and devilish discolorations; they can be left to come of themselves. Montserrat Caballé apart, is there any dramatic soprano—or mezzo—around who *could* sing the role too beautifully?

Miss Galvany let fly too wildly at the top, and she carried chest tone up into the middle range in an overexuberant way. There was a certain coarseness in much of her vocalism which need not have been there, for in the sleepwalking scene she showed that she can be precise and delicate when she chooses. I should like to hear her in a performance in which her first care was to sing the music as truly as possible; given her abundantly dramatic temperament—and the way the role is written—it would be unlikely to be tame. Both she and Mr. Edwards tended to sing out, even to splurge, in passages where they should have concentrated on an almost whispered, very soft yet intense projection of the words. To Felice Varesi, the first Macbeth, Verdi wrote, "I'll never stop telling you to study the words and the dramatic situation; then the music will come right of its own accord." The first duet for the pair is marked to be sung "*sotto voce*, dark and hollow throughout, except for the phrases where 'in full, broad voice' is indicated." The core of the second is marked "*pppp*, with the voice held back." Limpid vocalism à la Tadolini is wrong; so is any crude, loud barking or roaring.

The revised edition of 1865, abridged by several cuts, was used, but Macbeth's final monologue from 1847, "Mal per me," was included. It is better followed by the brief 1847 acclamation of Malcolm than—as in Baltimore—by the 1865 victory hymn. Ara Berberian was the Banquo, rather bumbly in tone. Moises Parker was the Macduff; he has a big voice but no stage presence. —ANDREW PORTER

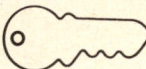
Four U.S. Air Force planes evacuated 801 Americans and 46 natives from the low-flying Eniwetok atoll in the Marshall Islands and flew them to Guam to escape the onslaught of Typhoon Mary.—*Washington Post*.

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on? Herbert Rutledge Southworth's "Guernica! Guernica!" (University of California Press; \$19.95) is a fascinating, profoundly depressing attempt to answer this question.

Though caught momentarily off-guard by the vehemence of international indignation—indignation emanating from Steer's graphic testimony—the Nationalist press bureau in Salamanca entered quickly into action. By April 27th, the day after the raid, Nationalist spokesmen were branding as lies the desperate outcry and summons for help which came from José Antonio de Aguirre, President of the autonomous Basque government. Thus, even as Steer's report reached English and American readers, a machinery of falsehood which was to grind away for almost forty years had been set in motion. The first line of mendacity was absolute. There had never been a raid on Guernica. The town had been destroyed by incendiarism from the ground. Knowing that their military position was crumbling, intent on arousing desperate resistance against the advancing army of General Mola, calculating shrewdly on international sympathy, the motley pack of "Reds," anarchists, and Basque nationalists had set Guernica to the torch. There were at least three lines of "evidence" to support this contention. Bad weather had grounded Nationalist planes on the relevant day, but a reconnaissance plane that had happened to be over the area two days later had reported seeing smoke and fires in a gutted, but not bombed, town. Almost immediately after the Nationalist occupation of what was left of Guernica, Spanish and foreign "experts" were brought in to testify that the nature of the damage was incompatible with aerial bombardment: there were no bomb craters, and the exact configuration of the charred and collapsed buildings showed that they had been fired from the ground upward. The third line of "proof" was by analogy: had not Irún and Eibar, two other Basque towns, been set alight by retreating Republican units shortly before the alleged raid on Guernica? (The Republicans themselves had never denied that their retreating troops burned Irún; the case of Eibar remains unclear.) By April 28th, Franco's headquarters could announce:

The slanderous maneuvers of the Basco-Soviet leaders, who, after destroying their best cities by fire, attempt to blame the National air force for these acts of barbarism, have provoked a boundless indignation among the National troops.... This falsehood coincides with the fact that the National air

Ole Brask

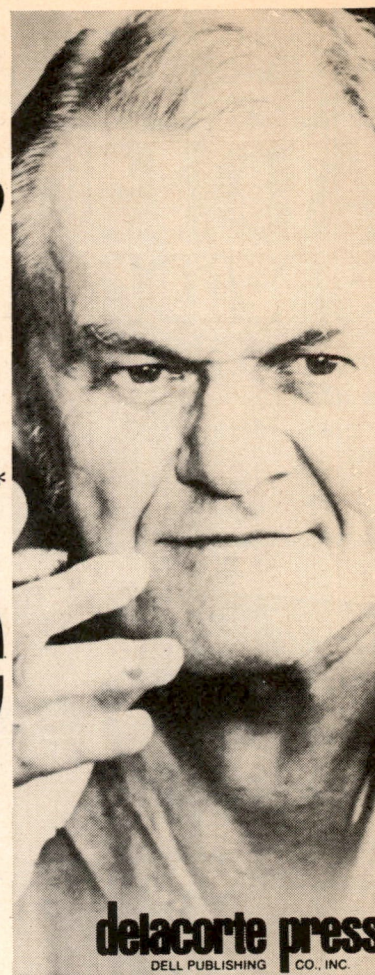
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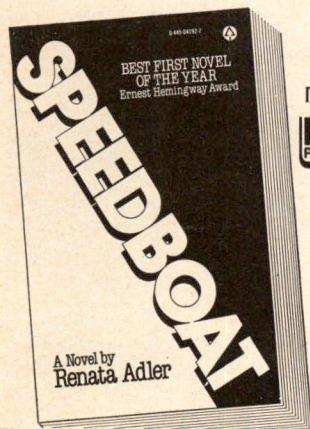
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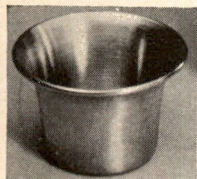
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force has been unable to fly during these last few days because of the fog and drizzle everywhere.

A further pronouncement followed at two in the morning on the twenty-ninth: "Guernica was destroyed by fire and gasoline. It was set on fire and converted into ruins by the Red hordes at the criminal service of Aguirre." As contradictions emerged in this version of the facts, a certain qualification was introduced. Far from being an open town, Guernica had actually been a site of Republican arms manufacture, and a few bombs might have been directed at a factory on the outskirts and at a strategic bridge leading out of the town. But the damage caused by these had been legitimate and minor. Seeing their chance, the "Red hordes" had gone to work. Give or take an occasional detail, this explanation of the ruin of Guernica became official Spanish history. Until 1967, for a Spaniard to question it in any way was tantamount to treason.

But it is not this internal lie that most exercises Mr. Southworth. It is the support and elaboration given to this lie by journalists, historians, and politicians in other lands, beyond the reach of Franco's security police and state censorship. It is the mechanics of corruption, self-deception, and cowardice which impelled French, British, and American newspapermen, pundits, and information agencies to propagate the Fascist line and to attempt to discredit the integrity of Steer's report. Pursuing every falsehood to the point of implacable minutiae, Mr. Southworth has written an invaluable footnote to the general history of tawdriness and failure of nerve in the non-Fascist West in the late nineteen-thirties. Each lie has its own ideological and circumstantial roots; the aggregate of untruth makes a sickening dossier.

Like the Dreyfus affair, the Spanish Civil War exposed fundamental lesions and antagonisms in French society and politics. Even French Socialists and left-wing liberals were afraid of challenging the mounting tide of Fascist and Nazi power. Insofar as Italian and German intervention was at issue, Guernica posed a spiky dilemma. To the vociferous right wing in French politics, the whole incident could be read either as a proof of Fascist invincibility or as yet another example of Red atrocities. Was it not patent that those who exclaimed loudest in outrage—the dauber Picasso, the rhymester Éluard—were Communists or shameless fellow-travellers? Internally di-

vided, mined by appeasement in foreign policy and by threats of a Popular Front at home, the Quai d'Orsay, which by May 5th was fully aware of the facts, played an ambiguous and, finally, a dishonest role. It labored to delay publication of eyewitness reports and did much to suggest that the Nationalist version might be the true one. Mr. Southworth shows in exact detail how this attitude was brought to bear on the French press agency Havas and its correspondents in the field.

In Britain also, Francoist lies found ready hearing and substantiation. Eden, who had little doubt as to what had happened at Guernica, adopted the pose of "trying to establish the facts." As he stated in Parliament on July 12th, "no British official was present at Guernica at the time of its destruction." But even such evasions did not satisfy the strong pro-Franco lobby in the British press and in conservative political and social quarters. The Catholic hierarchy, certain aristocrats with old ties to their Hispanic friends, and a pack of journalists, Catholics prominent among them, took up enthusiastically the myth of Republican incendiarism. Wing Commander (later Air Vice Marshal) Archibald H. W. James assured the House of Commons that he had visited the ruins and seen that "almost the whole of the destruction was done by simultaneous incendiarism from inside."

Washington comes out rather better. On May 6th, Senator Borah, of Idaho, spoke on the floor of the Senate. Every word he said will stand:

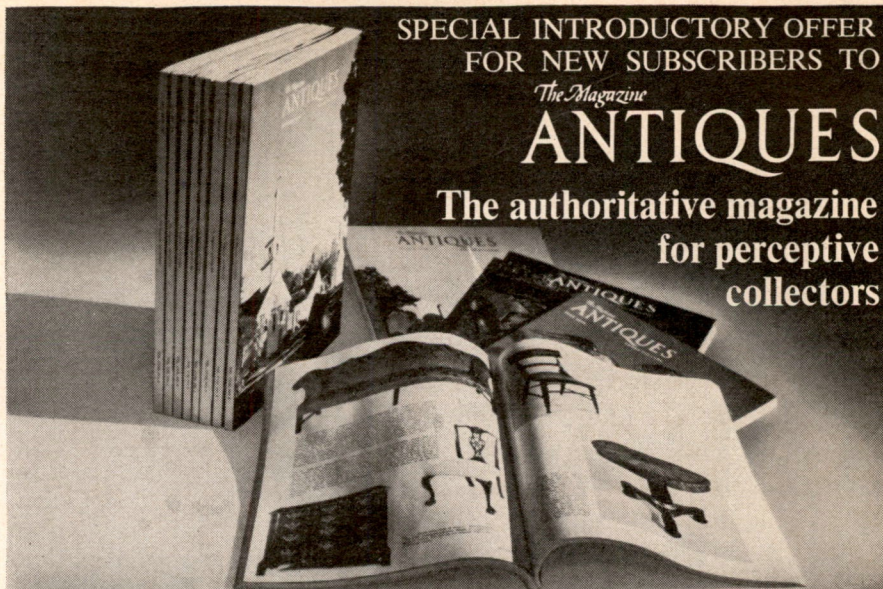
No language can describe the scene at Guernica, and Guernica was not a single instance; it was simply a culmination of a long line of unspeakable atrocities. It was not a military maneuver... An unarmed, non-combatant city was singled out for the most revolting instance of mass murder in modern times. It was Fascist strategy.

There is one psychological factor that Mr. Southworth may be underestimating in his relentless diagnosis of the lies and cowardice of politicians, press, and manipulated opinion. The enormity of Guernica was novel. It caught the imagination unprepared. The limits of credible inhumanity were nursery-style compared to what they are now. Warsaw, Coventry, Dresden, Hiroshima, the fire storms over Southeast Asia still lay ahead. Given the fact that the famous Belgian atrocity stories of 1914 had turned out to be fabrications, a fair measure of skepticism was still at work. An exactly comparable mechanism has been traced with regard to the non-

belief that met the first waves of news, and even pictures, from the Nazi concentration camps. We have finally come of age: today it is scarcely possible to imagine a bestiality we would not believe, package in the media, and digest.

With the systematic disclosure of German military archives and the gradual liberalization of the Franco regime, murder was allowed out. Slowly, with a cunning aura of ambiguity. But out, nevertheless. After 1967, even Spaniards were permitted to know that Guernica had been pulverized from the air. But this act of terror had been carried out by the Condor Legion on its own initiative. When the Caudillo found out, he was bitterly incensed. Ah, those nasty Germans. Today, even after Mr. Southworth's exhaustive indictment and such lucid general treatments as that of Hugh Thomas in his definitive book, "The Spanish Civil War," a few areas of uncertainty do remain. Nationalist involvement in the air strike is very nearly certain. But its precise weight and the degree to which Mola and Franco may have realized what was to be done cannot be rigorously determined. Nor is there any absolute proof of the motives that led von Richt-hofen's fliers to choose Guernica in the first place and to level it in the second. "I do not know," says Mr. Southworth, but he suggests that the most plausible reason was one of technical trial. Both Mussolini and Hitler were anxious to know how ruinous aerial bombardment could be, and whether the right mix of bombers and pursuit planes could reduce an urban population to panic. The hatred of their Nationalist hosts for the Basque independence movement made Guernica a handy, psychologically safe target. Guernica was a rehearsal.

The truth is a harsh, ironic muse, even toward those who, like H. R. Southworth, would serve her best. "The Spanish Civil War was fought so that the possessing class in Spain, those who owned the land, the factories, and the banks could keep their holdings," he writes. This is exactly the simplistic sort of idiom and pseudo-profundity put forward by those whom Mr. Southworth would expose. The Spanish Civil War was an immensely complicated mess, in which motives and fluctuations of attitude were nearly as numerous as atrocities. And the atrocities were far from being unilateral. If Nationalist warfare was a rehearsal for Fascist and Nazi tactics, certain aspects of Republican policy both at the



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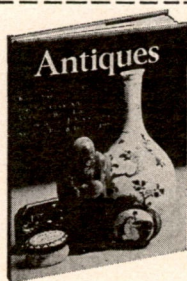
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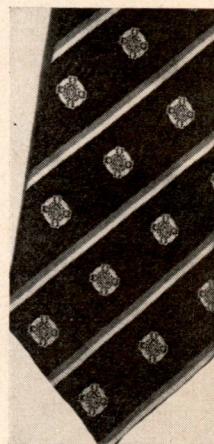
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front and behind the front turned into a hideous practice ground for Stalinism. And when Orwell and Borke-nau—neither of whom merits even a mention in Mr. Southworth's immensely compendious work—sought to say so, the left-wing and liberal press to which Mr. Southworth turns when seeking to establish the facts about Guernica would not print their dispatches. Moreover, if it is perfectly true that the Nationalists hated and oppressed the Basques, such loathing was returned. Today, when Guernica itself has been rebuilt and many of its twenty thousand inhabitants cross and recross the famous bridge that every bomb missed, Spain is toiling to emerge from a long nightmare. But the Basque militants, in the name of symbols and values that Mr. Southworth extolls, are bombing and murdering. One may view their cause as a legitimate drive for autonomy or as a tragic anachronism in a Europe that is trying to overcome ethnic and regional divisions. What is undeniable is the sterile ferocity of the deeds.

"Guernica! Guernica!" is a distinguished book. Had the author clung more fiercely to his own ideal of dispassion, it could have been a great one.

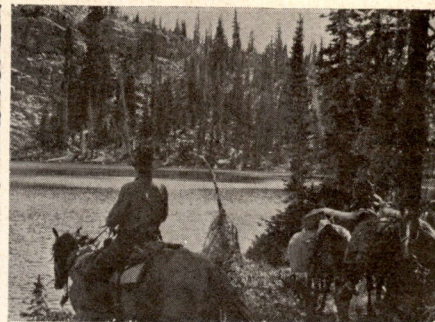
—GEORGE STEINER

BRIEFLY NOTED FICTION

SUMMER VISITS, by Margery Sharp (Little, Brown; \$8.95). The century-long comings and goings of the inhabitants of Cotton Hall, a much renovated East Anglian mansion, half-rectory, half-manor, which was bought in the eighteen-fifties by John Henry Braithwaite, a crusty old Lancashireman. Too much happens in this smoothly written book to swallow all at once (it reads as if it had been destined to be split up into segments for a BBC series), but taken in small doses, it provides some wickedly enjoyable portraits of profligate sons; a plump, good-hearted servant girl who becomes mistress of the hall; several ambitious children; and not a small number of rogues and adventurers. Miss Sharp's English men and women are almost always self-deluded and somewhat absurd, but their bumbings reveal a surprisingly large amount about the innards of British society.

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A YOUNG MAN IN SEARCH OF LOVE, by Isaac Bashevis Singer, with



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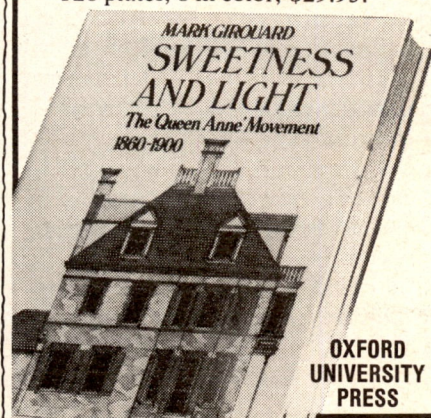
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